

Never Alone:
(Re)Coding the Comic Holotrope of Survivance

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“Like most Native people, I do not perceive of the world of creative writing as divided into categories of prose and poetry or fiction and nonfiction. Nor do I imagine myself crossing from political resistance into artistic creation and back again. Life is a confluence of creativities: art is a fluid political medium, as politics is metaphorical and artistic.”

(Haunani-Kay Trask, “Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization.”)

0. starting from the Center

I began this paper with the intent to author a piece on indigenous political ecologies within and without the *Never Alone* video game, articulating certain embodied material and discursive practices in the making and playing of the game. The deeper and more expansive the connections and stories became, the more I realized that immersion within the game and the (re)mapping of histories and materialities were altering how I thought and how I was writing. Alexander Galloway states, “[w]ith video games, the work itself is material action” (3). I want to extend this idea of material action further by thinking about praxis on multiple levels: the company and game creation, the play-interface, and now the articulation of these processes through written English.

This game is infused with the foundational principles of the Iñupiaq people—interconnectedness and interdependence. It is also infused with older sign technologies that are themselves “complex information systems with layers of meaning, memory, and interaction” (Loft 172). Putting those ideas into action-interface, I opened to the epistemic agency of the game¹ as a coauthor of this piece. It has shaped this work at every step, informing my layers of understanding, and remains what I return to for grounding my words and focusing my thoughts.

However, as I reread Gerald Vizenor’s writings on survivance and literature, this concept of co-author became inadequate to encompass the world-within-world of the story, the game system realm, the designers, players, and myriad other human and nonhuman interactions occurring on multiple levels. Thinking of *Never Alone* as a (re)coded comic holotrope of survivance retains that epistemic agency I noted earlier, but also incorporates that worlds-within-worlds, the “all” interplay of players, designers, and story within the story itself.

1. core samples

“When we locate the present of settler colonialism as only the production of the past, we overlook how settler colonialism is configured in relation to a different temporal horizon: the future.”

(Eve Tuck and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, “Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity”)

This article employs Mishuana Goeman and Gerald Vizenor’s concepts as my main theoretical threadwork, as a smaller reproduction of what resurgence theory does on a larger scale, and as academic praxis. In short; this example of indigenous digital media is not new, but a new emergence of a centuries-old way of relating to others, which has much to offer on many levels as it (re)maps cultural practices, deepening and rewiring human and nonhuman interdependence. These complexities and intertwined communities require a turning away from Western linear temporalities and theorizations, and a turn towards indigenous scholars who have already articulated theories of storytelling and media.

This is not to deny or exclude the invitational aspects of *Never Alone*; but by centering indigenous theory, it allows for what Mohawk scholar Deborah Doxtator describes as “points of possible rapprochement between two different ways of ordering knowledge and conceptualizing the past” (34). This approach turns towards inclusive indigenous futurities, while refusing the elimination and erasure tactics of settler ones, as noted by Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández.

At the core of this paper are two foundational concepts: (re)coding and comic holotrope. (Re)coding incorporates Mishuana Goeman’s use of (re) from her method of (re)mapping in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nation*. She defines (re)mapping as “a powerful

discursive discourse with material groundings... in which I would address the unsettling of imperial and colonial geographies.” She continues to note that this is the work of Native authors and communities to “write and undertake the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making, to generate new possibilities” (3). Using the “re-” within parentheses, she articulates a process of traditional and new storytelling of survivance. These stories of places and relational practices are not old, nor new—but a mix of both, allowing for multiple emergences.²

Comic holotropes themselves articulate two related concepts: game as world (re)mapping—rather than game as text—and the relationality and connections that reverberate through multiple realms, as drawn out by Gerald Vizenor. He outlines the comic holotrope of survivance in *Writing Indian, Native Conversations* as follows:

So comic holotrope is the question—it’s communal, and it’s an “all” figuration, the entire figuration—you have to recreate it, which is the entire figuration—of the community. You have to create a play of readers and listeners in the story itself.

That’s the comic holotrope. (117)

I will delve further into each of these concepts in later sections, highlighting them here to underscore their importance to situating *Never Alone*. Indigenous use of digital media warrants engagement of Indigenous theorists and scholars to this digital realm. Indigenous storytelling is political by nature, so it made sense to turn to Vizenor and Goeman’s work on political and literary analysis to explore the concept of *Never Alone* (re)coding the comic holotrope of survivance.

2. remedia(l) tendencies

“Of equal importance in these processes of counting is the dynamic relationship between the physical creation, the narrator, the narrative itself, the act of narrating, and the audience.”

Cheryl L’Hirondelle, “Codetalkers Recounting Signals of Survival”

David Gaertner wrote incisively about *Never Alone* for ISLA 2016, contextualizing it as remediation within Western new media and visual culture studies definitions: bringing old into new, highlighting Marshall McLuhan’s definition of it as a process in which one medium becomes the content for another. I press that more is being done here, thus my use of

(re)mediation rather than remediation. This is not to completely dismiss McLuhan’s contributions, but to center Indigenous literary and political scholars to reframe the discussion. I use three key citations to briefly trace the threads that help delineate (re)mediation from remediation.

English can be challenging to express something that, while defined as a “noun”, is ongoing, material and discursive, deeply relational, and always in-process. This paper uses gerunds, verbs and nouns to convey some of that—also emphasizing that Goeman and Vizenor repeatedly outline the ongoing and active nature of the terms they use. Even allowing for some flexibility in grammatical categories, remediation remains fixed to Western concepts of time and relationality.

Remediation also remains fixed to ideas of objects, which Indigenous digital media challenges on multiple levels. Within these media, objects can be a charge, an infusion of communal intention, and they can also contain multiple crossover points between written and oral transmission. As Cree artist, writer, director, and activist Cheryl L’Hirondelle notes in her chapter of *Coded Territories*:

What these historical Indigenous practices... suggest is our ability to take account of vital information with the creation of a physical object and move beyond what has been oversimplified as solely orally centred transmission processes. The “object” is charged and embodies the interplay of processes between the oral and the written (notched/drawn) used to aid in its own retelling. (157)

Extending this further, if Indigenous relational objects can be seen as hypertexts (Angela Haas) and/or as living beings connected to the community by ongoing generative processes (Jackson 2Bears), how could their emergence and agency within a communal digital form be framed as a mere remediating of one form into another?

In his essay “Mediacosmology”, Mohawk scholar and curator Steven Loft notes, “A cosmological model of communicative agency, then, transcends the simplistic notions of “romance” offered by anthropologists, ethnologists, art historians, and media theorists. There is no “re” for us” (172). Here, he refutes the simplistic binary invoked by McLuhan and his “tribal man” who has no sense of past or history, only the present, moving towards a more nuanced and connection-filled model.

Carrying this concept further, Loft notes other Indigenous scholars and artists who see these realms as already inhabited by our ancestors. He states:

If we, as Aboriginal people, see the ‘Internet’ as a space populated by our ancestors, our stories, and, in a wider way, ourselves, then we must believe it existed before the actual realization of the technology. It is then, indeed, a “cyberspace”, attuned to, and inclusive of, our past memories, our epistemological concerns, and the culmination of lived experience. (172)

If there is no “remediating” or “remediation”—as this leaves little room for Indigenous temporalities and perceptions of time/space/past/future—perhaps there is room for (re)mediation. A form which could take up these past memories, epistemological shifts, and lived experiences. Within the set of parentheses the ‘re’ takes on a significant shift; Goeman is careful to delineate what the (re) itself does in her method of (re)mapping. I am not glibly assigning the prefix to create some sort of Indigenous media theory chimera, but to invoke these generational, old-yet-new understandings. As she notes in the introduction to *Mark My Words*:

In an effort to recognize the recovery and extension of precolonial constructions of space in Native writing, I use the parenthesis around “re” in “(re)mapping” to acknowledge connections to cultural concepts... reflected in their work is an understanding of space passed down through generations, and it is often only the presentation of spatial concepts in new formats that are the contemporary formulations. *Even this format, however, contains elements of the traditional.* (213)
[Emphasis mine]

The use of the prefix within this paper is also not simply to riff on recode/rework as (re)code/(re)work, etc.—though I hope to retain an element of playfulness. Instead, I invoke the (re) within this paper to note these are emergences of much older understandings of space, place, and relations, and embrace the concept of these realms as already being inhabited by ancestors who reshape and reweave digital and physical teleologies, as *Never Alone* beautifully illustrates.

3. unsettl(er)ing emergences

“I think this game is going to be a seed, a new emergence of video game culture.”

(Qaiyaan Harcharek)

The Iñupiat believe this story, a digital emergence of “Kunuuksaayuka” as told by Robert Nasruk Cleveland (with permission granted by his daughter, Minnie Aliitchak Gray—Iñupiat Elder) is transformative, containing healing and power they feel is desperately needed at this time. Interconnectedness and deep relations are at its core, and particular elements resist being dissected or partitioned. To approach this emergence and trace the roots of this articulation of the story, I turned to Indigenous scholar and artist Chadwick Allen’s process of entwined analysis in his book *Trans-Indigenous*: to understand an Indigenous work, it needs to be situated in larger layers of context and meaning-making. His term trans-Indigenous is not meant to create a ‘universalized’ definition of indigeneity, but to encompass ways of relating and practices that can mitigate moving between realms—filling the interface between and interfacing different nations with a myriad micro-connections.

As that last phrase suggests, there are multiple realms of gaming, theory, and indigenous praxis to navigate. This particular emergence of the story within *Never Alone* is new; it is one more step in a longer series of art evolutions for the Iñupiat—from scrimshaw carvings on whale bone to ink and paper illustrations, oral stories to written then printed books—now digital media. What struck me, as I read some of the testimonies from the elders, was their acceptance of this as the story’s next expression, and their excitement. They had seen their stories unfold in various mediums, this was a new (re)telling they could share with the next generations. As their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were already immersing themselves in video games and digital learning tools, multiple translations and world-navigations were already occurring, now they could (re)map their own routes.

Returning to Chadwick Allen, he expresses this relational complexity as follows:

the realities of contemporary Indigenous identities describe multiple kinds of diversity and complexity; often, they describe seeming paradoxes of simultaneity, contradiction, coexistence. These qualities are the contemporary Indigenous norm rather than its tragic exception. (p xxxiii)

These multiplicities and paradoxes highlight the importance of using native theorists and nurturing a deeper understanding of the elements and communities that came together to create *Never Alone*. Here I am careful to note that these processes are ongoing, as the game expansion

releases, articles, books, digital media, and the communities involved continue to grow and inspire further emergences.

As Gerald Vizenor notes “political cultures begin at home” (Purdy 115); what the Iñupiat and CITC have done is examine what was, is, and may be their home. This game is one step towards a future that incorporates their worldview within these new realms. The mechanisms for accessing these realms were already there; the gaming systems and tech their children and community members were using. Now it has been reinterpreted/reimagined as a digital articulation of survivance. A story that we do.

Mishuana Goeman describes a process of “unsettling settler space” through (re)mapping with stories: “The imaginative possibilities and creations offered in the play of a poem, imagery of a novel, or complex relationships set up in a short story provide avenues beyond a recovery of a violent history of erasure and provide imaginative modes to unsettle settler space” (2). Thinking of this digital realm, how this game space is unsettled, and (re)woven, connecting with other physical and digital realms and beings. These actions are deeply political, but not “just” politics—as Allen notes, these are relational practices that move between realms, (re)coding systems and connections, (re)mapping spaces.

4. taproots/taproutes

“Creative people, however, know that culture is political. Writing, music, painting, dance, and voyaging are profoundly political....Not only the content of writing, but the act of writing is political. And naturally so.”

(Haunani-Kay Trask, "Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization")

4. taproots

Before moving into the inner workings and external resonances of the game, it is important to note its roots—the foundational threads woven before the release of *Never Alone*. Gloria O’Neill, President and CEO of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council Enterprises, Inc. (subsidiary of Cook Inlet Tribal Council) and Upper One Games, outlined the communal processes that Council engaged in order to invest in something that would give back to the community in tangible and intangible

ways. After investigating the potential for growth and return, the Council decided to invest in futures, rather than funeral homes (a common investment strategy). After careful consideration, CITC Inc. partnered with E-Line Media as Upper One Games in 2012, the first Indigenous-owned commercial game company in the United States. In 2014, the two organizations merged with plans to expand Indigenous gaming in partnerships with other communities.

The Iñupiat chose to invest in what their children were already doing: gaming. Or, evoking an older sense: playing, interacting with stories. The game systems were already there, the culture (in its early 21st century manifestations) is there. Various cultural practitioners and elders are featured in the game and on the website as Cultural Ambassadors; some are in education (digital education), some are polar bear guards and/or whale hunters (in traditional boats), others are traditional storytellers, musician, and artists. As Amy Fredeen notes in the very first Cultural Insight clip: “We are not a museum piece. We are a living culture”.

The game world takes an oral story that had been written down, affixed, then unlocks it through (re)newed oral and visual forms, then infuses it with other stories and histories via insight clips, website extras, blog posts, and more. Each step along the way, CITC referred back to the community to shape their decisions and practices. They left it to the community to decide who would be the voices of their narrators, community members were brought to the design studio (and designers brought to Iñupiaq territory many times) to ensure it was told in a way that was their worldview in digital form.

Visual elements were created using the same protocols. Scrimshaw pieces have a long history within Iñupiaq culture—images were (and are) carved on baleen or ivory; these series of images are used for storytelling or documenting a series of events. Images are read by the elder or carver to unlock the stories within—these were timelines of natural and political events or tales that instilled cultural, social and political practices. Within the game levels, scrimshaw style artwork is used in animation sections that begin or end game levels within *Never Alone*, superimposed with the voice-over in their native language. Much as scrimshaw can be unlocked by those who know the embedded histories and meanings behind it, there is much to think about regarding encoded and (re)coded meanings within the game realm of *Never Alone*.

Several elders and cultural ambassadors spoke of the joy in playing the game, of being both student and teacher. This is not by accident—*Never Alone* is designed to be best experienced in co-player mode³—with people playing next to each other, talking and planning,

sharing tips and suggestions. This was a way of returning to story as a way of connecting—an experiential interface between people and the non-human actors.

Another non-human actor, the weather (Sila) in the game and in the Arctic also had a definite ‘interface’ with the designers. Gloria O’Neill related a story during the Hawaiian Media Makers Conference in 2014: the early versions of the wind, sleet, and snow were deemed not quite right by the Iñupiat. The designers were brought out to Barrow, Alaska in mid-winter so they could experience it more fully: take photos, draw sketches, be immersed within it. This Sila immersion worked—the next version passed the scrutiny of the elders and cultural ambassadors. It translated so well that Columbia University is incorporating parts of the game in a class on climate change.

Key concepts used throughout this paper are articulated within the game, via twenty-four Cultural Insight video clips unlocked as the story progresses. Featuring the Iñupiat Cultural Ambassadors, they offer stories and insights about the game, characters, and key concepts: Sila (the atmosphere/weather—that which is from the land to the stars) has a soul, as do animals, and the land (Nuna). Nuna is also the name of the central character in *Never Alone*. These same concepts, emergences of Iñupiat traditional practices and stories, are also encoded within the game-making process.

4.b. taproutes

Humility and knowing “you are not the biggest force in the world” are key parts of the Iñupiat world, reflected in the making and playing of *Never Alone*. The making of the game required a lengthy and multi-layered process of community-based decision making and extensive designer-tribal collaboration and revision. This communal interdependence and sense of connectedness (lateral rather than a hierarchy) is also embedded in the game’s structure and play. When adapting the story for the game, several story elements were changed while keeping this in mind—the boy becomes Nuna,⁴ the arctic fox is added as another main character. She rides a polar bear, which is an actual experience of one of the elders, Fannie (Kuutuuq) Akpik. (This multi-temporal story-within-story-within story is unlocked as one of the cultural insights, fitting with the idea of comic holotrope).

Balance is also central to these worlds—*Never Alone* is a (re)mapping of beautiful forests and waters, but also harsh and unending winter in many chilling variations; even such beautiful

displays as the Northern Lights have a dangerous side to them. It also shapes some of the adversaries in the game: the Northern Lights which try to snatch up Nuna, the Blizzard Man causing unending winter, *Sila alannuqtuq*—Sila (weather/atmosphere) out-of-balance/changing. These are not seen as evil or bad, but beings operating at a different level of intensity, or once-human-like agents now out of balance (respectively).

For generations the Iñupiat have been intimately aware of climate change and the deeply connected systems disrupted by it. This particular issue emerging within *Never Alone*—networks within a larger system out-of-balance—has particular resonance through Nuna’s journey as a small, seemingly insignificant character up against forces that threatens to wipe out her entire community. On her quest, players must rely on others to advance and work towards restoring balance, even if in single-player mode. It cannot be done by one character alone—no ammo or gear drops, nor cheat codes; reaching the end of this story realm requires interdependence and timing.

This is a digital story (re)mapped as praxis, a way of relating to different worlds and realms that players can become immersed in, and (re)shaped themselves. Video games are well-suited to this type of immersion, and *Never Alone* is infused with the Iñupiaq world—the sounds of the language, the visual images, background sounds, cries and calls, weather sounds—these and more create realm-crossing paths designed to shift us, to affect and alter us, creating or (re)creating connections on multiple levels. Yet, underneath these other foundation threads, is perhaps the oldest one—our taproot here is a story. Stories matter. As Iñupiaq writer and consultant Ishmael Angaluuk Hope states: “We all do stories. We all live stories.” The next section engages with the literary-political-social theories of (re)coding to think about how this story, (re)mapped into a digital space, *does* renewed life in a new medium and realm, yet retains an ancestral center.

5. (re)Coded Territory

“Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous.”

(Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*)

Mobility and displacement have offered up challenges to Indigenous presences and paths/routes to maintain connections with human and nonhuman family. Stories have long been used to trace

the unsettling of settler boundaries, the continued existence and pushing against colonial narratives. As Mishuana Goeman notes, “Remembering important connections to land and community is instrumental in mapping a decolonized Native presence” (29). In *Mark My Words* she traces how stories “teach us how to care for and respect one another and the land; they endure” (34).

Part of this endurance is their complexity and richness—multiple layers of meaning allow for open and more coded access/understandings. If “territory... is constitutive of cultural, political, and economic practices” (Goeman 34), thinking of digital realms suggests not only (re)mapping, but (re)coding—pushing back against colonial structures which see digital space as Terra Nullius 2.0. I use (re)code to highlight that these stories are not just translations in a new realm, or game as text; orality and community translation are powerful challenges to these concepts. Richa Nagar’s writing on translation refers to it often being an act of violence. For Nagar, this indicates the translation of sounds to written or typed words—affixing an oral story to the written page, pinning it down, stripping it of further movement. She (as well as Noenoe Silva) note the violence of translating from one language to another. What I would like to pick up here is *Never Alone* as an act of (re)mediation and release, an emergence of survivance.

“Kunuksaayuka” is the basis for *Never Alone*—a version of an older story crafted and told orally by Robert Nasruk Cleveland. His daughter, Minnie Aliitchak Gray, was encouraged to write the story down; it was later published. Ishmael Angaluuk Hope came across the printed copy of her written retelling, and thought it was one of the best stories he had ever read.⁵

While the story itself has shifted shape (as noted earlier) the intrinsic elements of it have remained. Ronald (Aniqsuaq) Brower, Sr. is one of the Cultural Ambassadors of the Upper One company and *Never Alone* game, providing cultural insights, Iñupiat translation, and voice over work. He describes his childhood, and being trained, literally filled with stories in their language by his elders, so that he might share them with future generations:

“As a child disabled by rheumatic fever, I listened and learned many Iñupiaq myths, legends, history and stories from Elders that frequented my parents home. I would also be invited by Elders to listen and learn my people’s history and life experiences so I may be useful to our community in my adult years. How correct they were in choosing my life path!”

Ishmael and other Iñupiat cultural advisors (both young and old) note that it is common practice for elders to tell young children what they hope they will do or be for the community as they grow up. Over the course of their video clips or interviews on the game website, they note how fulfilling it was to express skills planted within them in the making of the game (and its supplemental release, *Foxtales*).

Returning to Goeman once again:

While I study contemporary Native American literature and not stories from time immemorial... its tendency in a single breath or word to recall hundreds, even thousands of years back by employing community, personal, and historical stories in intertextual moments allows us to see these sets of relationships outside the mapping of the state. (38)

Breathing life through the centuries, transcending intertextual spaces and the gaps between 0 and 1 in streams of code—these are stories as relations. “The truth about stories is, that’s all we are.” Thomas King begins his book with this statement—I use it here as a launch into the next section. These are stories as governance: highlighting the importance of interconnectedness and responsibility to each other, the land, and the world around them. They are also seen as transformative. If stories are indeed all we are, what does this mean in terms of relational webs of players, designers, storytellers, and the technologies we engage with to play the games?

6. net-work: kinnections + deep relations

The Native paradigm is comprised of and includes ideas of constant motion and flux, existence consisting of energy waves, interrelationships, all things being animate... If human beings are animate and have spirit, then “all my relations” must also be animate and have spirit.

(Leroy Little Bear, “Foreword”, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*)

These webs of connections are necessary for survivance storytelling to flourish, within *Never Alone*, it is an intimacy and interconnectivity through game play, immersion with an old story (re)mapped within a digital space. In this section I introduce my own neologism—*kinnections*—

to trace threads of this web of interconnectivity, weaving selected strands into this article. It is intended as a launching point rather than definitive statement—the networks reach out in more directions than is possible in multiple books, let alone one paper. Nonetheless, tracing these relations helps highlight their materiality—a richer one than may appear at first.

Within *Never Alone* in particular, and Indigenous games more broadly, materiality is more pervasive than it seems. I am engaging with particular Indigenous lines of thought, threads if you will, to tug ideas within Robbie Shilliam's concept of deep relations into a kinnected, trans-indigenous sphere. These threads are words on the page, pulled from a digital recording or image; what we weave here is perhaps more intangible than tangible, but nonetheless connected deeply by interdependence.

As with any deep interdependence, the game, company, tribe, players, land itself have a stake in each other. I take up Robbie Shilliam's terms to describe this interconnectedness, but shift it slightly. He defines deep relations in his work *The Black Pacific* as:

a relationality that exists underneath the wounds of coloniality, a cutting logic that seeks to—but on the whole never quite manages to—segregate peoples from their lands, their pasts, their ancestors and spirits. Decolonial science seeks to repair colonial wounds, binding back together peoples, lands, pasts, ancestors and spirits. Its greatest challenge is to bind back together the manifest and spiritual domains.

(13)

Binding back together manifest and spiritual domains presents a paradox that digital spaces might help mitigate—as this binding requires materiality. Materiality in an extended and very earthy sense, as it cannot leave nature out of materialism, a materiality that does things (Wark 14). *Never Alone* has a particular liveliness that cannot be separated from the material world, which is foundationally the natural world. Alexander Galloway calls a video game “a cultural object, bound by history and materiality, consisting of an electronic computational device and a game simulated in software” (1). I would like to decolonize this, extending it further than being viewed as an action-object—but as something which has a particular vibrancy, a liveliness that crosses realms.

Binding and relational threads are used here to describe the interstices between realms; when we cross over into a different media realm and immerse ourselves in a particular world, touching on deep, global infrastructures of trans-indigenous connectivity. These connections are

marked by invitations to participate, but the digital/physical world-making with *Never Alone* at its center has been created with Iñupiat ways of being. It will take up the questions of cosmologies and temporalities, seeds and emergences.

Weaving in the concept of deep relations helps encompass further these concepts of relating and moves to self-determination that underpin the story and gameplay, the creation and distribution, the materiality of resources, technology, and future plans. While examining them in detail is outside the scope of this paper, noting their connections to and through the game helps indicate additional depths of this relationality. Rather than a massive portmanteau or hyphenated kin-making-digital-physical-phrase, I will use kinnection to touch on this area. This term invites further development and discussion, but if we are tracing roots and routes—here we turn back to *Never Alone*.

Never Alone is a fitting emergence for articulating realm-crossing routes, as it draws on the materiality of itself—the earthiness of the console, the travels to get there, the electricity to utilize it. This materiality is in motion, the work-play a material action. Returning to Galloway:

With video games, the work itself is material action. One plays a game. And the software runs. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move. Here the “work” is not as solid or integral as in other media.

(p 3)

Here we are still stuck within Western concepts of work, binaries, and ‘operator’ versus ‘machine’. Galloway does note that “in our day and age, this is the site of fun. It is also the work site” (5), and he takes up the terms “operator” and “machine” not to downplay the fun within gaming, but “to stress that in the sphere of electronic media, games are fundamentally cybernetic software systems involving both organic and nonorganic actors” (6).

I would like to turn this line of thought in on itself a bit: teasing out the idea of *cybernetic networks* into *nets* and *work-play* of relational practices/kin-making across multiple realms. Seeing these as the threads that bind the interstices, that flow out from and back to the “cultural objects” Galloway refers to as a video game. It can be said that, just as the title denotes, we are never alone playing the game; *Never Alone* is more than a cultural object, even in the broader game theory sense. Taking back up the thread of the game as more than a co-author allows us to present it as a decolonial science practice/comic holotrope of survivance—moving between realms to relate a story of multiple worlds (touching on material and spiritual domains).

“I think we are more scientists than people realize—we have more knowledge of these things than people will ever know” (Angie (Patik) Kellie, *Never Alone* Cultural Insight video).

In the introduction to *Native American DNA*, Kim TallBear notes the importance of “the practice of making kin” and the deep meaning in circulation, as she puts it: “routedness” versus “rootedness”. In this section, TallBear also thanks Donna Haraway for “insisting that there is pleasure to be had in the confusion of boundaries—in their undoing.” Unsettling boundaries, embracing routedness—patterns and pathways that unsettle settler spaces as they (re)map them; within this r(re)mapping and (re)connection lies an undoing as well as a remaking. What Galloway sees as being less than “interactive” (6) can be powerfully generative and disruptive at the same time.

I would like to pick up the idea of migration and travel further here to think of routedness and movement in digital realms, pathways and kin-making, and maintaining practices for both human and nonhuman family. Revisiting the earlier use of the term root/rooted to view *rootedness* as planted within a story, traveling along the story route through varied temporal and spatial perceptions, returning back, flowing through, changed but familiar. These decolonial intimacies indigenous game realms offer extend kin-making and practices through various materialities and multiple realm-crossings.

These net-works—encompassing readers, viewers, makers, players, and more—are whirling in kinetic webs of survivance that elicit resonances and tugs kinnection threads. For assistance in further tracing multiple narrative voices and connections in these worlds/realms within realms—I turn to Vizenor and his concept of comic holotrope of survivance.

7. comic holotrope of survivance: or, when Fox is more/less/all

“The fox was reborn into a new form. Or was it who he really was this whole time?”

(Narrator, *Never Alone*)

Here we pick up these threads of (re)coding and kinnection to weave them alongside Vizenor’s articulations of comic holotrope of survivance, tracing some of the digital-political *Never Alone* and *Upper One Games* has (re)coded. It is fitting to place the section on (re)coding comic holotropes after kinnections—as it is a communal “all” figuration by an extended community, a

(re)coded space. Articulating it here remains playful and open to expanded allusion and layered meanings; much like survivance, it is praxis—theory as action. We do stories. Linking Ishmael Angaluuk Hope with Haunani-Kay Trask, these “story-doings” are inherently, profoundly, and richly political.

Before releasing these lines of flight within *Never Alone*, it is helpful to revisit various pieces of this concept as drawn out by Gerald Vizenor. As stated earlier, he outlines the comic holotrope of survivance in *Writing Indian, Native Conversations* as follows:

So comic holotrope is the question—it’s communal, and it’s an “all” figuration, the entire figuration—you have to recreate it, which is the entire figuration—of the community. You have to create a play of readers and listeners in the story itself.

That’s the comic holotrope. (117)

This play of readers, listeners, story within the game is assisted by a key figure: the trickster. “The trickster is a communal sign in a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole figuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse” (*Narrative Chance* 9). Vizenor delineates the trickster and comic holotrope in a later section as sign and signifier, noting Lacan’s liberation of the signifier⁶ within trickster narratives. I will not delve too deeply into sign and signifier here, as their emergences in digital spaces transforms the discourses about them, pushing for (re)newed ones. But it is important to note this delineation of narrative voices/comic holotrope as the signifier in trickster narratives, and the trickster as semiotic sign that “wanders between narrative voices and comic chance in oral presentations” (*Narrative Chance* 189).

I do not wish to imply that Fox is a trickster in a generic sense; returning to Chadwick Allen’s concepts, thinking of Fox as a whole within the game and the community. “The trickster is a communal sign, a comic holotrope and a discourse; not a real person or a tragic metaphor in an isolated monologue” (*Narrative Chance* 9). The particular kinnections for his game allow Fox to push back against boundaries Vizenor proscribes around tricksters in prior literary emergences: “The trickster is disembodied in a narrative, the language game transmutes birds and animals with no corporeal or material representations” (*Narrative Chance* 196). Here there is another materiality now intimately involved: earth, metals, oils, plastics, electrical currents and charges.

I use ‘involved’ with some humor here—at a certain point (now infamous on community boards and playthroughs), the only way out is through breaking player perceptions of “tragic.”

Vizenor notes the trickster is comic and communal multiple times in *Narrative Chance*, noting this is “neither the ‘whole truth’ nor an isolated hypotragic transvaluation...” (12). The tragic is outlined as a linear single story arc that communal comic holotropes resist—as does the trickster as the sign, as does Fox as our emergence of this sign within *Never Alone*.

At this particular game point, when a player ‘wins’ or ‘beats’ that level by making it through all the challenges and unlocked bonuses, a figure comes out and brutally snaps Fox’s neck. This step is necessary, as it leads to a (re)emergence of the Fox within the next levels, however it is rough to experience (even for those replaying the game). Players react very strongly to the character’s perceived death, the unfairness of that action, etc.

Fox exemplifies both the comic and survivance—transforming into another form on the next level. As shown by the fox quote opening this section “or was this his true form to begin with?” perception and form are fluid; tragedy is turned into something else, here the comic is communal, shared humor between game, players, narrator, etc. The ‘tragic single story’ thread is playfully inverted, woven back into the larger holotrope. Walter Kerr notes in his classical studies on tragedy and comedy—there is no way out in comedy, and tragedy is the form that (cruelly) promises a happy ending. In *Never Alone* it remains cyclical, we continue on within the game, transformed, to return to the end-as-beginning: the same scene it started from.

8. comic holotrope: (re)coded

“The Western world is finally coming to understand how our ancestors embedded and encoded our ceremonies, languages, world views, and metanarratives as complex algorithms that refer back to the very creation of the universe.”

(Cheryl L’Hirondelle “Codetalkers Recounting Signals of Survival”)

Now that we have traced some of what Fox does within *Never Alone*, as a sign that becomes the comic holotrope of survivance “(t)rope are figures of speech; here the trickster is a sign that becomes a comic holotrope, a consonance of sentences in various voices, ironies, variation in cultural myths and metaphors.” (*Narrative Chance* 190). *Never Alone* is a shifting interplay of narratives within the game and there is much more to be said, written, and created around the ideas of comic holotropes and tricksters in digital realms.

Between the storyteller/narrator, Fox, and glitches (which often happen through the fox when played by the game system itself)⁷ there are significant emergences of the comic holotrope: playful, communal, with nuances and multiple layers/realms shifts that push against the “flattening” Leanne Simpson and others caution against—within game worlds, these nonhuman intimacies and unexpected turns are heightened. All of which weaves into a “whole figuration”/emergence that “ties the unconscious to social experiences” (*Narrative Chance* 196); (re)coding these spaces as acts of survivance.

Shifting discourses beyond critical theory and political ecologies—thinking of this digital (re)mapping of these holotropes as political/cultural/artistic emergences of survivance requires a moment to think about what this term might emerge as in a digital space. Thinking of survivance as ways of relating and reshaping other realms within our context of (re)mapping, it allows for invitational play with resurgence theory,⁸ partnerships and remaking within digital realms. Turning to resurgence theory, scholar Leanne Simpson notes similar themes to those presented earlier in this writing: seeds, stories, emergences in her book, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*:

Interpreted within our cultural web of non-authoritarian leadership, non-hierarchical ways of being, non-interference and non-essentialism, the stories explain the resistance of my Ancestors and the seeds of resurgence they so carefully saved and planted. (18)

In the first section, Simpson clarifies that she sees these stories told in print or video/film as losing some of their emergent transformative power, becoming “flattened” and “unilateral” (34).

Gerald Vizenor’s pivotal definition of survivance in *Manifest Manners* is “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry”; they have much in common with resurgence, and, as the site survivance.org states, “[a]n act of survivance is Indigenous self-expression in any medium that tells a story about our active presence in the world now.” The flattening she articulates can be understood on some level within words on a page. Yet as Vizenor, Goeman, and others have noted, there is incredible depth and play within this form. Leanne Simpson has engaged with this in her more recent works: in her chapter in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, she describes how digital storytelling plays a “critical role” in

Indigenous nation-building and resurgence. In addition, these forms work to decolonize and envision Indigenous-centered collective futures for all our relations.

(Re)mapping survivance into digital game spaces traces these relations even further. If we think about spatial (re)mapping within Indigenous stories, and the (re)mediation of them into digital environments—*Never Alone* in particular—dynamic circular web patterns swirl in an emergence—an imaginative and lively imitation, rather than a fixed representation. In other words: a comic holotrope of *survivance*, with kinnections bringing depth and multilateral resonances. Returning to survivance.org: “[s]urvivance is more than mere survival—it is a way of life that nourishes Indigenous ways of knowing.”

Comic holotrope as a concept is important to articulate through ever-political 21st century Indigenous artists and creators. Vizenor parallels Trask when he cautions: “Social scientists take Native stories as representations, not imitations or figurations, because they are not literary artists. They’re methodologists, looking for a faux reality” (Purdy 116). If the comic holotrope is all communal, relational, and all figurative/emergent; here this conceptual tool is (re)mapped to think of new-yet-old relational emergences, a story infused with survivance, (re)coded for the 21st century.

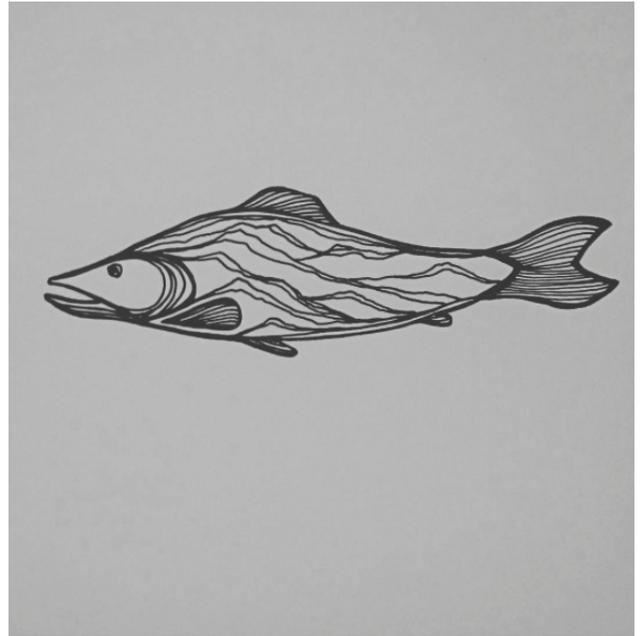
As with the word survivance, the use of comic holotrope here is done not as a neologism in the digital realm, but infused with a “beyond meaning” or “greater meaning” (Purdy 117). This is an attempt to (re)code the comic holotrope of survivance into digital spaces, thinking about realm emergences: highly imitative realms with their own agency.

The comic holotrope within this world also incorporates that there are actors within the game that are not human: glitches, and AI moving the NPC in unexpected or seemingly counterproductive ways. Temporal plasticity occurs on multiple levels, causing shifts in relations and intimacies. The game pushes certain questions: what other intimacies get clipped when we focus on human ones? What happens when we recenter affective intimacies on the nonhuman?

9. end as beginning—survivance into resurgence

“The lie, the great American lie that we have been exterminated by the colossus of the North has been uncovered... Decolonization is all around us. My work could not exist outside this context, nor would I want to write in any other.”

(Haunani-Kay Trask, “Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization”)



There is no neat conclusion here. As this realm and these concepts (re)code in new emergences, I close our journey together with a look towards current and future projects, which promise to take these ideas even further and deeper. There is more here than can be articulated by the written word. As Vizenor notes, social scientists often become fixated on terms, articulations, definitions—which cuts many kinnections that help shape these works in intangible ways.

While it is important to attempt to note some of these potentials and articulations, I want to close with the images above, thinking of them as world (re)mapping, allowing us “to see that the map is an open one and the ideological and material relationships it produces are still in process” (Goeman 38). The first image is of a game interface as Turtle Island, designed by Elizabeth LaPensée, for the Indigenous languages singing game Singuistics developed by Pinnguaq. The second is by Lianne Charlie, who created *gyó/Salmon* in connection with learning traditional salmon relational practices in her home territory. Both women are phenomenal digital artists and Indigenous scholars who push, what we assume to be, ones and zeros, thinking of the spaces between them as relational practices, engaging with multiple realms and materialities to

(re)code digital images and spaces, embodying kinnections and the responsibilities those kinnections entail.

Several younger and older Iñupiat community members refer to *Never Alone* as a seed, a story which can unfold further (as it has for generations). As with any seed, they need care to flourish into emergences, which may take route/root in multiple spaces. From a polar-bear guard to a Basque-American currently writing alongside Kānaka Maoli ‘ohana hanai in Hawai’i, tracing these threads is not meant to exclude others, nor preclude their unfolding elsewhere, but to highlight how *Never Alone* as (re)coded holotrope moves far beyond ‘preserving a culture’ or ‘saving’ a people. It also offers future lines of flight for thinking about (re)coded comic holotropes of resurgence.

As the Iñupiaq believe, this story is transformative. It deepens kinnections: story and practices of interconnectedness and deep relations form trans-indigenous patterning across human and non-human worlds. To articulate this further—especially how the liveliness of the game interplays with the concepts of (re)mapping, kinnection, and survivance—I close with two quotes from Amy Fredeen:

I grew up hearing some of Our traditional stories, but not fully aware of the values imbedded in those stories. Being a part of the team that made this amazing game has been a gift. I have reconnected with stories long forgotten, and have been able to realize how important storytelling is for passing on wisdom and values.

She invites us to think of stories as already coded in multiple ways: having numerous layers of meanings that are embedded, unfurling in new-yet-familiar ways as they are (re)mapped and (re)coded in different realms. Within this unfurling are depended kinnections—experiencing places and ties in visual and aural kinetic environments and networks within networks, expressed through *Never Alone*’s comic holotrope: a holotrope of survivance and perhaps (invitational) resurgence of indigenous futurities. As Fredeen succinctly explains it: “It’s not one way of seeing things, it’s one way of knowing you’re connected to everything.”

Notes

¹ Richa Nagar described this process in her colloquium, Political Science Dept. UH Mānoa 3.11.16

² *Emergence* here is infused with deeper meaning by Jon Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe Silva in their Political Science Colloquium at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa on 3.21.15. They

articulate emergence as the shoots of the ancestors: new, but of the same stalk. They engage with this concept (rather than rhizome) to maintain earthiness of these connections and recognize indigenous connections and contributions to this way of thinking.

³ The Parents’ Guide for the game suggests several ways to co-play with children and adults of various ages and gaming experience.

⁴ O’Neill noted, when making the game, they looked at how many games featured male and female lead characters, and decided on Nuna to help restore balance to that area.

⁵ This multi-temporal story-within-story-within story is unlocked as one of the cultural insights, fitting with the idea of comic holotrope outlined in the fourth section of this paper.

⁶ Lacan cautions against clinging “to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatsoever” (from “Sign, Symbol, Imagery”).

⁷ I have been musing over whether these could all be seen as aspects of the same comic holotrope voice/4th character.

⁸ I note here there are many overlaps, and much more writing to be done on the intersections of the two concepts within Indigenous digital spaces.

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